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OFFICE OF NAVAL RESEARCH

Contract N00014-82K-0612

R&T CODE: 4133032

TECHNICAL REPORT NO. 92

Biosensors Based on Ultrathin Film Composite Membranes

by

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Prepared for publication

in

Polymeric Materials in Biosensors and Diagnostics

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Ft. Collins, CO 80523

January 25, 1994

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

OMB No. 0704-0188

1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)	2. REPORT DATE	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED
	Jan. 25, 1994	Interim

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE
Biosensors Based on Ultrathin Film Composite Membranes

5. FUNDING NUMBERS
Contract
N00014-82K-0612

6. AUTHOR(S)
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8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
ONR TECHNICAL REPORT # 92

9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
Office of Naval Research
800 North Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217

10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER

11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
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13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words)

This paper introduces a new approach for designing chemical sensors. This approach is based on a concept borrowed from the membrane-based separations area -- ultrathin film composite membranes. Ultrathin film composite membranes consist of an ultrathin (less than ca. 100 nm-thick) polymer skin coated onto the surface of a microporous support membrane. These composite membranes have made a tremendous impact on the field of membrane-based separations because they can offer high permeate flux without sacrificing chemical selectivity. These two qualities (high permeate flux and high chemical selectivity) are also required in polymeric barrier layers in chemical sensors. Therefore, the ultrathin film composite membrane concept should be applicable to sensor design. In this paper we present proof of this concept by showing the response characteristics of a prototype glucose sensor based on an ultrathin film composite membrane.

14. SUBJECT TERMS	15. NUMBER OF PAGES
Sensors, glucose sensors, ultrathin films	20
	16. PRICE CODE

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT
		UNCLASSIFIED	

Biosensors Based on Ultrathin Film Composite Membranes

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This paper introduces a new approach for designing chemical sensors. This approach is based on a concept borrowed from the membrane-based separations area - ultrathin film composite membranes. Ultrathin film composite membranes consist of an ultrathin (less than ca. 100 nm-thick) polymer skin coated onto the surface of a microporous support membrane. These composite membranes have made a tremendous impact on the field of membrane-based separations because they can offer high permeate flux without sacrificing chemical selectivity. These two qualities (high permeate flux and high chemical selectivity) are also required in polymeric barrier layers in chemical sensors. Therefore, the ultrathin film composite membrane concept should be applicable to sensor design. In this paper we present proof of this concept by showing the response characteristics of a prototype glucose sensor based on an ultrathin film composite membrane.

Introduction

We introduce a new and general approach for designing chemical sensors. This approach is based on a concept borrowed from the membrane-based separations area (1) - ultrathin film

composite membranes (2-7). Sensors based on such composite membranes should have a number of potential advantages including fast response time, simplicity of construction, and applicability to a number of molecular recognition chemistries and signal transduction schemes. In order to demonstrate the feasibility of this new approach for sensor design, we have prepared and evaluated a prototype electrochemical glucose sensor. This particular sensor was chosen to demonstrate the feasibility of this new sensor-design concept because the molecular recognition and signal transduction chemistries are well established (8-11). A number of other sensing schemes (12-16) could, however, have been chosen.

Concepts

The development of ultrathin film composite membranes was one of the most important breakthroughs in the membrane-separations area (2-5). Such composites consist of an ultrathin (less than ca. 100 nm-thick) chemically-selective "skin" bonded to the surface of a microporous support membrane (3-6). The desired chemical separation occurs within the ultrathin skin and the thinness of this skin insures that the flux of permeate across the membrane is high. The microporous support provides the requisite mechanical strength. Ultrathin film composite membranes can provide high chemical selectivity, high permeate flux, and good mechanical strength. This combination of properties would be impossible to achieve in a homogeneous membrane (3-5).

In general, barrier layers in sensors must provide some degree of chemical selectivity, yet must also allow for high rates of analyte flux (so as to minimize sensor response time). These

membrane requirements (high selectivity and high flux) are identical to the requirements in the membrane separations area (1). Hence, if ultrathin film composites are ideal in this area, these composites should also be ideally-suited for sensor applications.

Two general types of sensors based on ultrathin thin film composites can be conceptualized. These sensor-types are differentiated by the degree of selectivity required of the composite membrane. The first, and experimentally more difficult, type would be based on a membrane which has molecular specificity for the analyte species. That is, in this type of sensor, molecule-recognition chemistry would be built into the ultrathin film such that only the analyte molecule is extracted and transported by the composite membrane. The second, and experimentally easier, sensor type would be based on an ultrathin film which provides some rudimentary form of selectivity only (i.e. passes small molecules but not large molecules or neutral molecules but not charged molecules, etc.). This "prefilter" membrane would transport the analyte molecules into an internal sensing solution which would contain the molecule recognition chemistry and the transducer for translating this chemistry into a measurable electrical signal.

The prototype glucose sensor described here is an electrochemical example of a "prefilter" membrane device. The internal sensing solution contains glucose oxidase, an electron-transfer mediator (ferrocene-carboxylate, FcC^-), and a working, reference, and counter electrode (Figure 1). When glucose enters this inner solution (from the analyte solution), it is oxidized by the glucose oxidase; this oxidation process leaves the flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD) cofactor associated with the enzyme in its reduced state ($FADH_2$) (17). $FADH_2$ is reoxidized by the

oxidized form of the mediator. Note that the mediator is present within the device in its reduced form. The oxidized form is generated by scanning the working electrode potential through the mediator oxidation wave. When no $FADH_2$ is present (i.e. no glucose in the analyte solution), a normal diffusional voltammogram is obtained (see Figure 2, curve A). When $FADH_2$ is present, the oxidized mediator generated, oxidizes the $FADH_2$; the mediator, in turn, gets re-reduced. This causes the mediator wave to adopt a characteristic catalytic shape (8,11,17) (Figure 2, curve B). The difference between the maximium currents in the catalytic (with glucose) and diffusional (no glucose) waves is proportional to the concentration of glucose in the analyte solution. This recognition and transduction chemistry is well known and has been incorporated into other prototype glucose sensors (8,17).

Experimental

Device Fabrication. The support membrane for the ultrathin film composite was an Anopore (Alltech Associates) microporous alumina filter; these membranes are 55 μm thick, contain linear, cylindrical, 250 nm-diameter pores and are ca. 65 % porous (18). One face of the membrane was rendered electronically conductive by sputtering (19,20) an Au film (20-30 nm-thick) across the membrane surface. This Au film served as the working electrode; electrical contact was made by using Ag-epoxy to attach a Cu wire to the Au surface (19) (Figure 1). This Au film is too thin to block the pores at the membrane surface (5,21); this is important because analyte must pass through the membrane into the internal sensing solution (Figure 1).

The surface of the membrane opposite to the Au film was then coated with an ultrathin (ca. 50 nm) skin of a poly(dimethylsiloxane); this was accomplished by using a novel interfacial polymerization method developed in these laboratories (22). Briefly, the alumina support membrane is placed on a wet filter paper, which acts as a source of water vapor. The upper face of the membrane is then exposed to dimethlydichlorosilane vapor. This causes a thin skin of poly(dimethylsiloxane) to form across the upper surface of the membrane. The films used in the sensors described here were on the order of 50 nm in thickness.

We have found that in sensors based on this simple homopolymer, the mediator, FcC^-, leaches from the internal solution into the analyte solution. In order to mitigate this problem, the films were subsequently cross-linked and sulfonated. Cross-linking was accomplished by exposing the film to a 5 % (v/v) solution of trichloromethylsilane, in ethanol. Sulfonation was accomplished by exposing the film to a 2 % (v/v) solution of 2-(4-chlorosulfonylphenyl)ethyltrimethoxy silane, also in ethanol. These silanes attack the ends of the homopolymer chains and thus introduce the desired chemical functionality into the polymer film. The details of these materials science aspects of this sensor will be discussed in a future paper (22).

Finally, the Au/Anopore/polymer composite membrane was glued to the end of a glass tube (I.D. = 0.64 cm), which forms the body of the sensor (Figure 1). The internal solution - a small volume of pH 7.0 phosphate buffer (0.05 M) containing 200 units per mL of glucose oxidase (Sigma; Type VII) and saturated (ca. 3 mM) with FcC^- - was then added. A Ag/AgCl reference and gold wire counter electrode were immersed within this internal solution (Figure 1). As indicated in Figure 1, one of the beauties of this new approach for making sensors is that a

totally self-contained sensing device is obtained; i.e. external electrodes are not required. In a sense, this design is like that of an ion-selective electrode (ISE) in that this glucose sensor contains an internal reference electrode. However, an ISE still usually needs an external reference electrode. The sensor design described here (Figure 1) requires no external electrodes.

Response Characteristics of the Prototype Sensor. The response characteristics of these devices were probed using a variety of experiments; the most straight forward was a simple calibration experiment. The sensor was placed in a known volume (30.0 mL) of pH = 7.0 phosphate buffer which initially contained no glucose. The potential of the Au film working electrode was then scanned through the mediator oxidation wave to obtain a cyclic voltammogram for the mediator confined within the internal solution. A typical voltammogram is shown as Curve A in Figure 2. Known volume increments of glucose solution were then added to the external "analyte" solution. The analyte solution was stirred continually. A voltammogram for the mediator was then obtained as before; a typical voltammogram is shown as Curve B in Figure 2. Note that the wave now has a catalytic appearance (9) due to the reaction between the oxidized mediator and $FADH_2$; this electrochemistry has been described in detail by others (11,17,24-26). Calibration curves were obtained by plotting the difference between the maximum currents in Curves A and B vs. the concentration of glucose in the analyte solution (Figure 3).

The response time of the device was also investigated. This was accomplished via a potential-step experiment. The sensor was placed in a vigorously-stirred buffer solution that was initially devoid of glucose. The potential of the Au film working electrode was stepped from 0

V (no mediator oxidation) to +0.5 V, where the oxidation of the mediator in the internal solution occurred at the diffusion-controlled rate. (All potentials are reported vs. Ag/AgCl). The resulting current-time transient associated with mediator oxidation was recorded on an X-Y recorder. The potential was then returned to 0 V to re-reduce the mediator. A second (identical) potential step was then conducted. However, in this case, the external (analyte) solution was spiked with glucose 4.5 sec. after initiating the potential step. The current-time transient was again recorded. The response time of the sensor was obtained from the difference between the two transients.

Oxygen present in the analyte solution presents a potential problem for enzyme/mediator-based sensors of this type. This is because O_2 can also oxidize $FADH_2$. Thus, if the O_2 concentration in the analyte solution changes during an analysis, the response of the device to glucose (via the mediator-oxidation route) will also change. Various schemes for circumventing this problem have been devised (10). We expected that our sensors would be less susceptible to changes in O_2 concentration in the analyte phase, because the electrochemistry occurs in the internal solution which is always exposed to air. To test this premise, we obtained voltammograms for the mediator with the sensor in contact with an air-saturated and a degassed analyte solution. As will be shown below, this sensor is nearly insensitive to changes in O_2 concentration in the analyte solution.

Results and Discussion

The primary function of the ultrathin film composite membrane in this simple prototype sensor is to confine the internal solution components. This necessitates that the ultrathin polymer film

is completely defect-free. We have probed for defects in the films used here by looking for glucose oxidase in the analyte solution. If defects of the size of the glucose oxidase molecule (160,000 - 186,000 M.W. or ca. 4.3 nm in diameter) (27-29) were present in these films, the enzyme would leak freely into the analyte solution. However, no glucose oxidase could be detected (electrochemically) in the analyte solution, even after overnight exposure of the sensor to this solution. These results show that the ultrathin films used here have essentially no (i.e. an undetectable number of) defects that are larger than ca. 4.3 nm. While not evaluated in these preliminary investigations, this lack of transport of proteins should also be useful in keeping proteins that might be present in the analyte solution from entering the internal solution. Hence, the ultrathin film composite membranes used here have a rudimentary *sized-based selectivity*.

Chemical selectivity was also built into these films so as to minimize transport of the FcC^- through the film; this was accomplished by sulfonating and cross-linking the films. While this approach dramatically lowered the rate of FcC^- transport, trace concentrations of FcC^- could be detected (electrochemically) in the analyte solution after several hours of exposure of the sensor to this solution. This problem could be further mitigated, or perhaps eliminated, by increasing the molecular weight and the anionic charge of the mediator. Alternatively, the film chemistry could be changed. For example, recent work has shown that $FADH_2$ can give its electrons directly to the doped form of polypyrrole; i.e. a mediator is not necessary (30). We have recently developed an interfacial polymerization method to synthesize ultrathin film composite membranes based on polypyrrole and its derivatives (3). This creates the exciting possibility of making a mediator-free glucose sensor of the thin film composite type.

The mediator-based chemistry used here to detect glucose is well know and interference from other molecules, that might be present in the analyte solution, have been studied in detail (10). For this reason (and because the primary object of the work, to date, has been to provide proof of concept for a general sensor design) we have not yet investigated the effects of these interferences on the response of this prototype sensor. It is important to point out, however, that a number of these potential interferents are anionic (10). Because the rates of anion transport in the sulfonated film used here is low (vide supra), this film should provide some level of protection against these anionic interferents.

A calibration curve for glucose is shown in Figure 3. As is typical for enzyme-based sensors of this type, this curve shows a region of linear response at lower concentrations and a region of flattened response at higher concentrations (9,11,17,24-27,31). The reasons for these response characteristics have been discussed by others (9,11,17,24-27). The extent of the linear region can be adjusted by varying the concentration of mediator and glucose oxidase in the internal solution. The calibration curve shown in Figure 4 is linear throughout the physiological concentration range for glucose (4 to 5 mM for healthy patients and up to 20 mM for diabetics) (32,33).

The effect of the concentration of O_2 in the analyte solution on the response of this prototype sensor is explored in Figure 4. Figure 4A shows voltammograms for the mediator when the electrode is in contact with a degassed analyte solution and Figure 4B shows analogous voltammograms when the electrode is in contact with an air-saturated analyte solution. In both cases mediator voltammograms for analyte solutions devoid of glucose (symmetrical wave) and

in the presence of 2.0 mM glucose (catalytic wave) (9) are shown. As indicated previously, the analytical signal is just the difference between the maximum currents in the catalytic and conventional waves. In the air-saturated solution, this difference is 24.5 μA; in the degassed solution, this difference is 25.5 μA.

These data show that this new glucose sensor is nearly insensitive to changes in O_2 concentration in the analyte phase. Indeed, the change in O_2 concentration explored in Figure 4 represents the largest conceivable change (no O_2 to the air-saturated value) that could be encountered in, for example, an in vivo experiment. In spite of this large change in the concentration of O_2, the analytical signal changed by only 4 per cent (11,17). Analogous results were obtained at glucose concentrations as high as 30 mM. In essence, the O_2 present in the internal solution (where the electrochemistry occurs) acts as a buffer against changes in concentration of O_2 in the external solution. Furthermore, if the internal solution is exposed to air, the rapid equilibration of this solution with O_2 in the air insures a constant concentration of O_2 in the internal solution. If, for a particular application, the device needed to be hermetically sealed, one could envision introducing an O_2-generating electrode into the internal solution to insure a constant O_2 concentration in this solution.

Finally, one of the most important potential advantage of a sensor based on an ultrathin film composite membrane is fast response time. Figure 5 shows that extremely fast response is, indeed, observed with these simple prototype devices. The curve labeled "no glucose" is a current-time transient associated with a potential-step oxidation of the mediator within the internal

solution, when the external (analyte) solution is devoid of glucose. A typical chronoamperometric decay of current with time is observed (34). The curve labeled "with glucose" is associated with an analogous potential step; however, in this case, the external solution was spiked with glucose 4.5 sec. after initiating the step. A steady-state signal to glucose is observed in less than two seconds. This is one of the fastest responses of any enzyme-based glucose sensor to be described in the literature to date (11,35-37).

Conclusions

We have demonstrated a new concept in chemical sensor design - sensors based on ultrathin film composite membranes. We believe that this design is generic in that it should be amenable to other molecular recognition schemes (38), other film chemistries (3-5,7), and other signal transduction processes (12-16). With regard to other film chemistries, we have developed four new interfacial polymerization methods for forming ultrathin film composite membranes (3-5,7). With these methods, films based on almost any conceivable chemistry could be fabricated for sensors of this type. Alternative transduction schemes might include fiber optic-based transducers (12- 16). For example, the molecular-recognition chemistry might produce a colored species which could be monitored by a fiber optic probe inserted into the internal sensing solution (16,39,40).

Furthermore, because the internal solution and transduction system can be easily removed from the body of the device (Figure 1), this sensor design creates the interesting prospect of using a single sensor body to make a variety of specific sensors. This design also allows for replenishing

and sampling of the internal solution. This capability could be built into the device by adding solution inlet and outlet lines. The internal solution could also be subjected to additional chemical analyses to detect species which partitioned through the membrane. In this sense, the sensor would resemble a microdialysis device (41). Finally, sensors based on thin film composites should also be easy to miniaturize. One approach might be to coat the thin film onto a microporous hollow fiber. As part of our membrane separation work we are developing methods to coat such hollow fibers with ultrathin polymer films (43). We believe that the ultrathin film composite membrane is a promising and versatile approach for sensor design.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Office of Naval Research and the Air Force Office of Scientific Research. Barbara Ballarin was supported by the Ministero Dell'Universita' e Della Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica (Rome).

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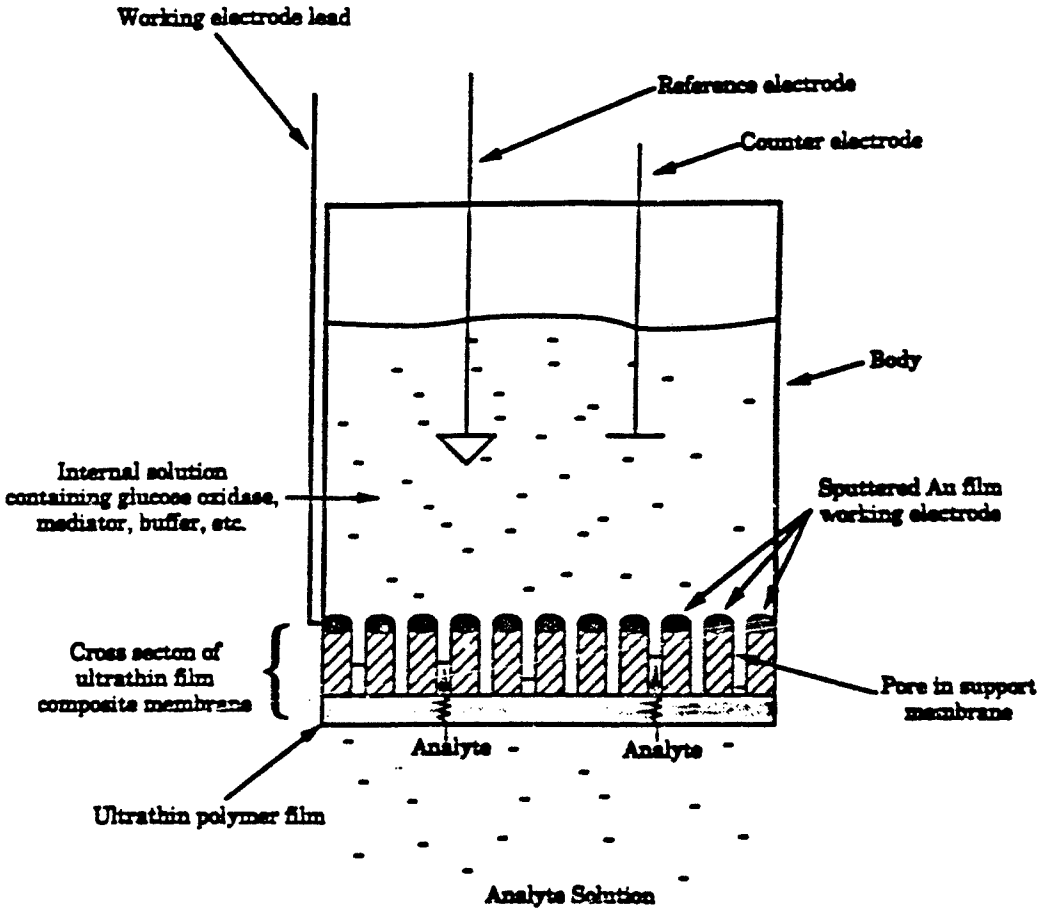
Figure 3 Calibration curve for the prototype ultrathin film composite glucose sensor. The regression coefficient for the linear region (up to 22 mM) is 0.995.

Figure 4 Cyclic voltammograms showing mediator voltammetric waves in deaerated (A) and air-saturated (B) analyte solutions.

Figure 5 Chronoamperometric experiment showing the response time of the prototype glucose sensor.



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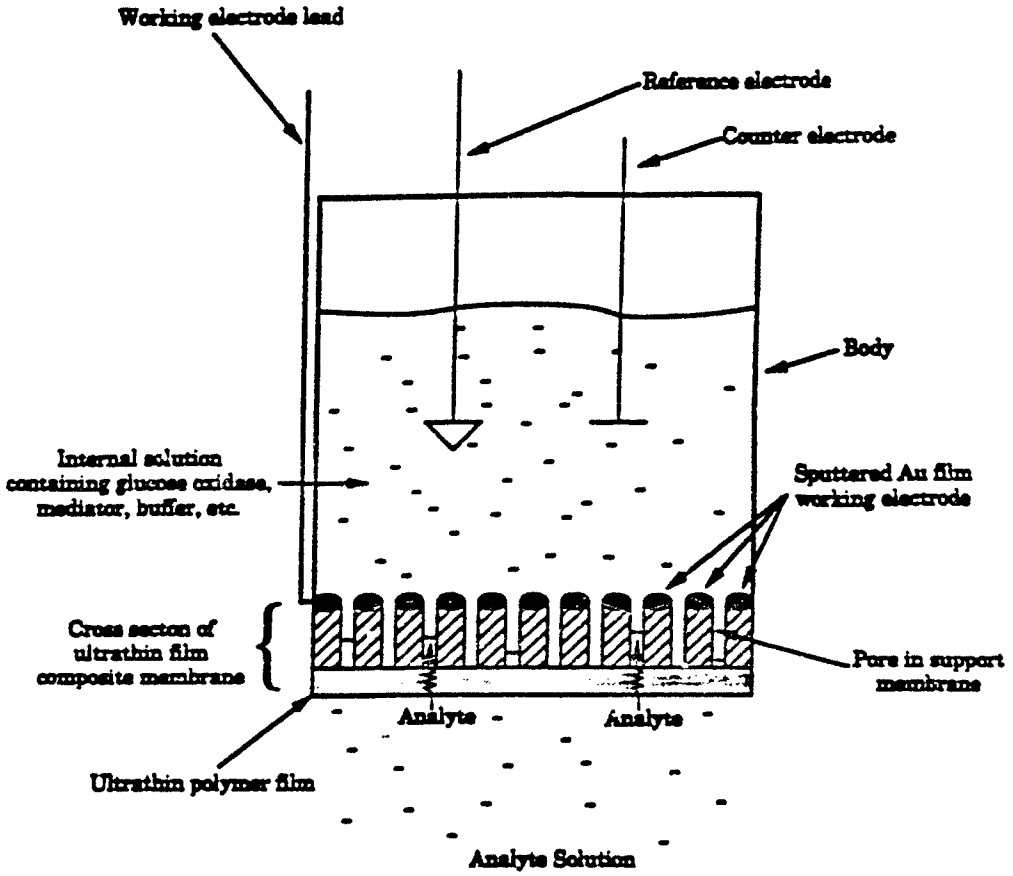

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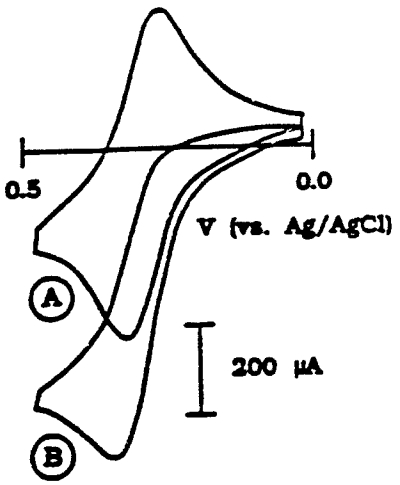

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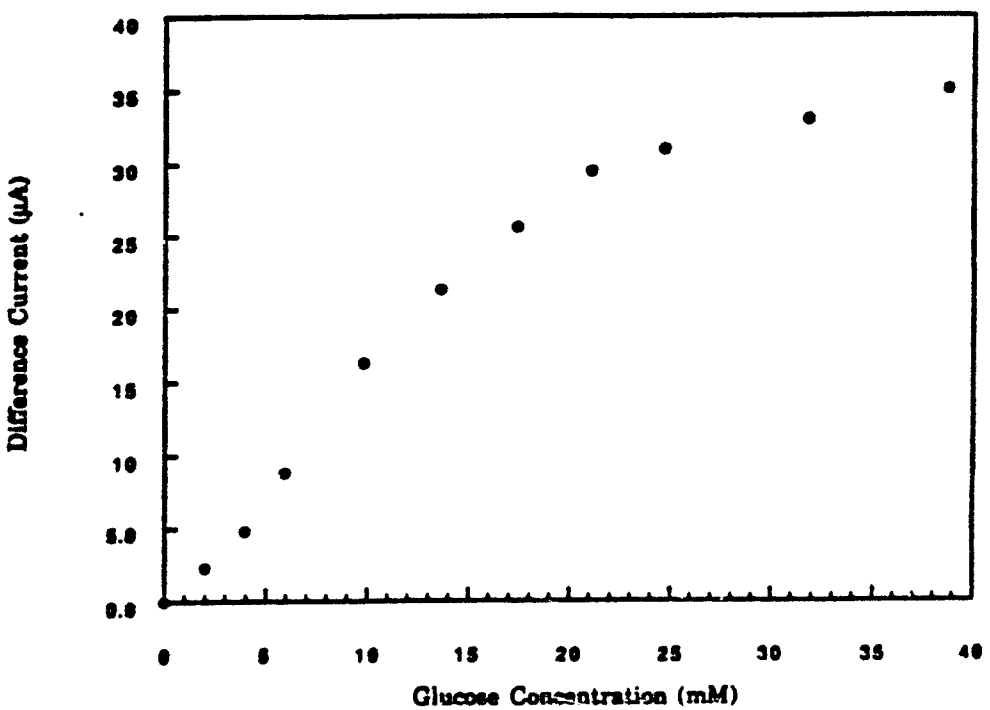

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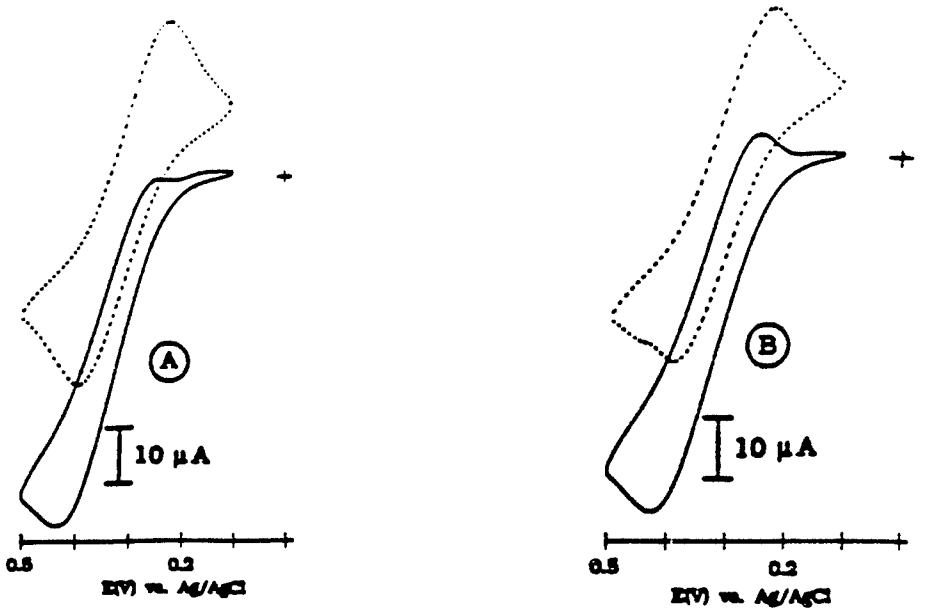

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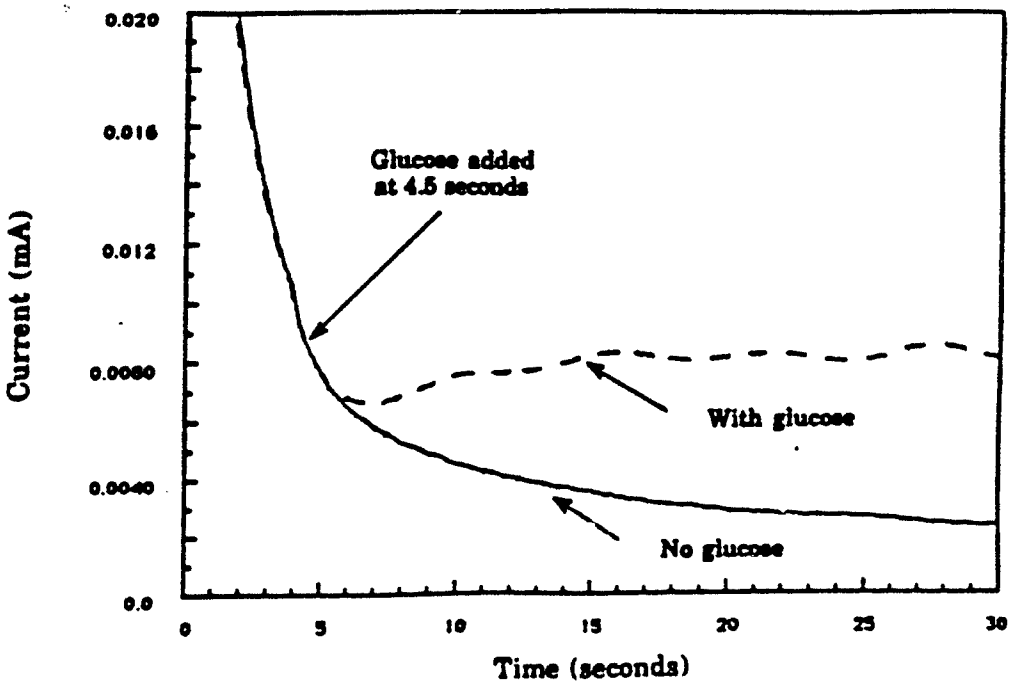

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